

6. USE THE AGRICULTURAL PROJECT TO ADVANCE WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP, EMPOWERMENT, AND EQUALITY

Agricultural projects are anti-poverty projects and the goal is to graduate farmers from poverty. Increasing women's leadership, empowerment, and equality is an additional goal. So why should it be attached to an agricultural project? For two reasons. Agricultural projects provide the best vehicle for increasing women's leadership, empowerment, and equality in rural areas. Also, more than half of poor farmers are women and addressing their leadership, empowerment, and equality as well as their income increases the results and impact of agricultural projects.

The Interview

Hermalinda Oshi was asked if the coffee project made her more of a leader.

Hermalinda replied. "The men always talked. They asked the questions. They talked to the Ingeniero (agronomist) like he was one of them. They weren't afraid to talk. But I was. But I always went to the technical assistance, and I listened, and I tried to do what the Ingeniero and Don Diego (the promoter) said with my coffee trees.

Then Doña Marta (one of the community leaders) said that the next technical assistance would be in my coffee plot. We were pruning trees, and after the Ingeniero showed us, he gave me the saw. I began cutting the extra ejes (trunks) on another coffee tree so there would be only two. Then I asked questions.

I am not a leader like Doña Marta. But I can speak more in the technical assistance I can ask questions. I can talk more."

Hermalinda was also asked if she felt more in charge or in control of her life.

Hermalinda replied. "Making the business plan made me see my farm as a business. At first I didn't understand it too well. But the second time I could see how I could increase my harvest and make more money. I wasn't sure about husking, but husking together helped me. Don Celestino (a neighbor) helped me. And I was glad that the community sold together.

I have three children, and my husband left. So I have to make the business plan and try to increase my harvest and decide how much to husk. I am worried about the changes in price. But I know how to increase my harvest and husk more. That I can do, and it will help my income."

Hermalinda was asked if she feels more equal to men.

Hermalinda replied. "No. The men can do things that I cannot do. They just do them. They can leave if they want too. I have to stay with the children. But I can earn

money like the men. I don't negotiate with FECCEG (an exporter) like the men. But Doña Marta does.

I can make a business plan like the men. And Shený (her daughter) helps me. And I can increase my harvest and husk more coffee like the men. Maybe I am becoming more equal to men."

Use the Project to Increase Women's Leadership, Empowerment, and Equality

Project implementers can use their agricultural projects to advance women's leadership, empowerment, and equality in several ways.

First, make equal participation of women a condition of all project activities. Explain this condition at the start of the project to the women and men of each community group or producers' association. If women's participation falls well below 50%, tell the members of the group or association that they are on probation and must correct the situation. If they do not, drop them from the project.

Second, hire women as well as men as project staff. The women who work as staff are role models, and they encourage more women to participate in the technical assistance, ask questions, and be more active in the project. Projects need community leaders who work as volunteers that schedule and follow up the technical assistance in their community. Two are needed, and project implementers should require at least one be a woman. Many projects hire skilled farmers as paid part-time promoters to work with agronomists in providing technical assistance, and they too should be women as well as men. There are few women agronomists, and staffing this position with women is harder. But hiring women as well as men as community leaders and promoters is a strong beginning for equality. The women who work as staff express leadership and empowerment and encourage it in others too.

Third, help farmers adopt business as well as farming practices. Farmers need business as well as agricultural practices to be successful commercial farmers, and the business practices give substantial boost to women's leadership and empowerment. Meeting and negotiating with buyers, learning markets, making business plans, selecting the farming practices to adopt, and evaluating results are enormously powerful opportunities and tools for developing leadership and empowerment.

Fourth, add additional activities for women if they are not participating equally in the technical assistance. Men are accustomed to dealing with organizations from outside the community, and they tend to dominate the technical assistance. However, project implementers can add additional assistance for women in solving common problems or setting personal goals and reporting results. This gets them talking in public and helps them participate equally in the technical assistance and any leadership roles offered by the project.

What Agricultural Projects Can Do for Women

Women need a vehicle -- an opportunity or activity -- for developing leadership, empowerment, and equality. They can talk about leading and being empowered in workshops, but they also need opportunities to practice these characteristics. They become leaders by leading in something. They become empowered by expressing dominion in some aspect of their lives. And building a family-farm business provides the largest number and variety of opportunities for practicing, developing, and expressing these qualities.

Women in rural communities have little chance to advance themselves through education. Many of them had little formal education, and there is no adult education. And even if women were to gain some education, there are few opportunities for salaried labor in rural communities. The women could look for work in the city, but it is hard to take their children, and hard to leave them with family or friends. What the women do have is land, their labor, a tradition of farming, and the opportunity to become successful commercial farmers.

Building a family-farm business requires a lot of decisions. How much land to use for food crops. How much for cash crops. Which land for each. When to sow. Which practices to adopt in order to increase productivity. Whether to purchase seeds, fertilizer, and insecticides or use your own seed or make your own fertilizer and insecticide. Which practices to adopt in order to increase product quality, value-added processing, and price. When to harvest. Where to sell. An agricultural project helps women to make these decisions, and many more. The goal of the project is to help farm-women increase their income, but in doing so, the agricultural project provides lots of opportunities to help them increase their leadership and empowerment as well.

Also, if the agricultural projects also help farmers adopt business as well as farming practices, it will provide unparalleled opportunities for helping women increase their leadership and empowerment. Women meet and negotiate with exporters and processors; they learn their market and decide where to sell. They analyze alternatives for increasing income and make business plans. At the start of each season, they select the practices they will adopt during the season, and at the end of the season they evaluate their results. The business practices are managerial in nature, and they are particularly good for building leadership and empowerment.

In addition, when women participate equally with men in a project, they advance their equality as well as their leadership and empowerment. Women work together with men in learning better farming practices, and because this is vocational education, they are actually working together in the learning. They may also work together in selling their crop or product. And, if the project also helps them adopt business practices, they work together in learning how to build their businesses. Equality is a change in thought as well as a project requirement, and all this collaboration goes a long way toward changing thought.

What Women Can Do for Agricultural Projects

The additional effort for women's leadership, empowerment, and equality repays the agricultural project with more results and impact.

More women's participation, more results. Any effort on behalf of women -- requiring equal participation, hiring women as project staff, the business practices, or additional activities -- increases women's participation in the project and that, in turn, increases project results. More than half of poor farmers are women because men often leave their rural communities on search for salaried labor in the cities or other countries, or sometimes they just leave. For example, 62% of the coffee farmers in Doña Hermalinda's region are women. More women's participation means more farmers adopting better farming practices. More farmers increasing productivity, product quality, and value-added processing. More farmers increasing income.

More farmer continuity, more results. Women are more likely to stay in the community. This provides more continuity in participation in the project, which favors more project results. Men are more likely to leave the community in search of salaried labor, and women are more likely to stay to take care of the children. Some women do leave for salaried labor as well, but not as often because it is hard to leave the children and raising them in a poor neighborhood of the city is a lot harder than raising them in a rural community. It takes a few years to build a successful family-farm business, and each year's advances build upon those of the previous years. More continuity in building these businesses means more results.

More women's leadership and empowerment, more results. Leadership and empowerment are key characteristics for building a successful family-farm enterprise. Giving women as many opportunities as possible to develop these characteristics accelerates the growth of their family-farm businesses, and the more rapid the growth, the more rapid the increases in income. The causal relationship goes both ways. The agriculture project provides unparalleled opportunities for increasing women's leadership and empowerment. Conversely, women need these characteristics to be successful farmers, and as they develop them, they become successful commercial farmers and increase their income more rapidly.

The Closing

Cristina Arpasi a dairy farmer in Peru says, "Women take care of the cows. I grew up milking. Now I am an older woman and the project helped me learn the buyers and make a business plan. I decided to grow oats and now my cows eat better and give more milk. I sell to the processor that pays the most. Now I am a business person not just a woman who tends cows."